

# The Howard Collector

SPRING 1972

16



# *The Howard Collector*

Spring 1972  
Volume 3, Number 4  
Whole Number 16

## CONTENTS

---

Robert E. Howard	
The Fire of Asshurbanipal . . . . .	4
Letter . . . . .	28
Visions . . . . .	30
Marching Song of Connacht . . . . .	36

---

Editorial Notes . . . . .	2
Tower Bard Hero . . . . .	27
Dust. . . . .	31
Conan's Parents . . . . .	32

THE HOWARD COLLECTOR is edited and published, twice annually, by Glenn Lord, P.O. Box 775, Pasadena, Texas 77501. Single copy 60 cents. Copyright (c) 1972 by Glenn Lord. All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A.

## Editorial Notes

In his letter of August 29, 1936 to Otis A. Kline, Dr. I.M. Howard wrote: "There were three manuscripts ready to be mailed to Weird Tales ... "Black Hound of Death," "Fire of Asshurbanipal" and "Dig Me No Grave." There was a notation on back of envelope directing me to send these to Weird Tales in case of his death. I have a letter in which Mr. Wright accepts "Black Hound of Death" and "Fire of Asshurbanipal" for \$100 and "Dig Me No Grave" for \$50. These were the last stories he wrote and were mailed after his death and are not paid for. This is why they did not appear on Robert's ledger."

Dr. Howard was in error about the date of writing of "The Fire of Asshurbanipal" and "Dig Me No Grave," for these were originally written early in the 1930's when Howard was experimenting with stories in the Lovecraftian vein. "Dig Me No Grave" was rejected by Ghost Stories; there is no record of where "The Fire of Asshurbanipal" was submitted. Both stories were rewritten for submission to Weird Tales. Aside from the denouement, there is no difference between the original and rewritten versions of "The Fire of Asshurbanipal." Note the similarity in the original version's denouement and the poems "Skulls and Dust" (ECHOES FROM AN IRON HARP) and "Hopes of

Dreams" (Witchcraft & Sorcery #7).

Lancer Books has reissued WOLFSHEAD, but KING KULL is reportedly out of print, although it may be reissued. BRAN MAK MORN is out of print, and will not be reprinted by Dell. Also out of print are THE PRIDE OF BEAR CREEK and the second printing of RED SHADOWS...Now out is ECHOES FROM AN IRON HARP, the third poetry collection (Donald M. Grant, West Kingston, R.I. 02892; \$6). It is an impressive looking volume, with full color jacket and frontispiece, and ten black-and-white interiors, all by Alicia Austin...Roy A. Squires (1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale, Calif. 91201) has printed two Howard poems, THE ROAD TO ROME and BLACK DAWN. Hand set type, fine papers, very limited printing; \$5 for each booklet.

Marvel Comics has revived its KULL THE CONQUEROR comic; adaptations of some non-series Howard stories will also shortly be appearing in Marvel's comics.

Among the Howard papers were some lists of correspondents. I would appreciate any leads on the following persons; their address as of the time is listed.

Earl Lee Comer, Dallas, Texas

Earl Baker, Ballinger, Texas

Edna Mann, Bagwell, Texas

Bernie Willbanks, 511 N. 3rd St., West Monroe, La.

Alvin P. Bradford, 1711 N. Brazos, San Antonio, Texas

Mrs. A.M. Blackburn, 217 Warwick Blvd, San Antonio

Percy Houghton, c/o Wesley Mager & Co., 2 Rector

St., New York, N.Y.

# The Fire of Asshurbanipal

ORIGINAL VERSION

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

Yar Ali squinted carefully down the blue barrel of his Lee-Enfield, called devoutly on Allah and sent a bullet through the brain of a flying rider.

"Allaho akbar!" the big Afghan shouted in glee, waving his weapon above his head, "God is great! By Allah, sahib, I have sent one of the dogs to Hell!"

His companion peered cautiously over the rim of the sand pit they had scooped with their hands. He was a lean and wiry American, Steve Clarney by name.

"Good work, old horse," said this person. "Four left. Look - they're drawin' off."

The white-robed horsemen were indeed reining away, clustering together just out of accurate rifle-range, as if in council. There had been seven when they had first swooped down on the comrades, but the fire from the two rifles in the sand pit had been deadly.

"Look, sahib - they abandon the fray!"

Yar Ali stood up boldly and shouted taunts at the departing riders, one of whom whirled and sent a bullet that kicked up sand thirty feet in front of the pit.

"They shoot like sons of dogs," said Yar Ali in compla-

cent self-esteem. "By Allah, did you see that rogue plunge from his saddle as my shot went home? Up, sahib, let us run after them and cut them down!"

Paying no attention to this outrageous proposal - for he knew it was but one of the gestures Afghan nature continually demands - Steve rose, dusted off his breeches, and gazing after the riders, who were now white specks on the desert, said musingly: "Those fellows ride like they had some set purpose in their minds - not a lot like men runnin' from a lickin'."

"Aye," agreed Yar Ali promptly and seeing nothing inconsistent with his present attitude and recent bloodthirsty suggestion. "They ride after more of their kind - they are hawks who give up their prey not quickly. We had best move our position quickly, Steeve sahib. They will come back - maybe in a few hours - maybe in a few days - it all depends on how far away lies the oasis of their tribe. But they will be back. We have guns and lives - they want both.

"And behold."

The Afghan levered out his last empty shell and slipped a single cartridge into the breech of his rifle.

"My last bullet, sahib."

Steve nodded. "I've got three left."

He lifted his canteen and shook it. Not much water remained. He knew that Yar Ali had a little more than he. The big Afghan, bred himself in a barren land, needed less water than did the American, though the latter, judged from a white man's standards, was hard and tough as a wolf. As he unscrewed the canteen cap and drank very sparingly, Steve mentally reviewed the chain of events that had led them to their present position.

Wanderers, soldiers of fortune, thrown together by chance and attracted to each other by mutual admiration, he and Yar Ali had wandered from India up through Turkestan and down through Persia, an oddly assorted but highly capable pair. Driven by the restless urge of the inherent wanderlust, their avowed purpose - which they swore to and sometimes believed themselves - was the accumulation of some vague and undiscovered treasure - some pot of gold at the foot of some unborn rainbow.

Then in ancient Shiraz they had heard of the Fire of Asshurbanipal. From the lips of an ancient Persian trader, who only half believed what he repeated to them, they heard the tale that he in turn had heard in his distant youth. He had been a member of a caravan, fifty years before, which, wandering far on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf in quest of pearls, had followed the tale of a rare pearl far into the desert. The pearl, rumored found by a diver and stolen by a sheik of the interior, they did not find, but they did pick up a Turk who was dying of starvation, thirst and a bullet wound in the thigh. As he died in delirium, he babbled a wild tale of a silent dead city of black stone set in the drifting sands of the desert far to the westward, and of a flaming gem clutched in the bony fingers of a skeleton on an ancient throne.

He had not dared bring it away with him, because of an overpowering brooding horror that haunted the place, and thirst had driven him from the silent city into the desert where Bedouins had pursued and wounded him; he had escaped, riding hard until his horse fell under him. He died without telling how he had reached the mythical city in the first place, but the old trader thought he must have come



from the northwest - a deserter from the Turkish army, making a desperate attempt to reach the Gulf.

The men of the caravan had made no attempt to plunge still further into the desert in search of the city, for, said the old trader, they believed it to be the ancient City of Evil spoken of in the Necronomicon of the mad Alhazred - the city of the dead on which an ancient curse rested. And the gem was that ancient and accursed jewel belonging to a king of long ago whom the Grecians called Sardanapalus and the Semitic peoples Asshurbanipal.

Steve had been fascinated by the tale. Admitting to himself that it was doubtless one of the ten thousand cock-and-bull myths mooted about the East - still, there was always a possibility. And Yar Ali had heard hints before of a silent city of the sands; tales had followed the east-bound caravans over the high Persian uplands and across the sands of Turkestan, into the mountain country and beyond - vague tales, guarded whispers of a black city of the genii, deep in the hazes of a haunted desert.

So following the trail of the legend, the companions had come from Shiraz to the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf, and there had heard more from an old man who had been a diver for pearls in his youth. The loquacity of age was on him, and he told tales repeated to him by wandering tribesmen who had them in turn from the wild nomads of the deep interior - and again Steve and Yar Ali heard of the still black city with giant beasts carved of stone, and the skeleton sultan who held the blazing gem.

And so, mentally swearing at himself for a fool, Steve had made the plunge, and Yar Ali, secure in the knowledge that all things lay on the lap of Allah, had come with him.



Their scanty money had been just sufficient to provide riding camels and provisions for a bold flying invasion of the unknown. Their only chart had been the vague rumors that placed the supposed location of the City of Evil.

There had been days of hard travel, pushing the beasts and conserving water and food. Then a blinding sand-wind in which they had lost the camels. After that, long miles of staggering through the sands, battered by a flaming sun, subsisting on rapidly dwindling water, and food Yar Ali had in a pouch. No thought of finding the mythical city now. They went on in hope of stumbling upon a spring; they knew that behind them no oases lay within a distance they could hope to cover on foot. It was a desperate chance but their only one.

Then white-clad hawks had swooped down on them out of the haze of the skyline, and from a shallow and hastily scooped trench, the adventurers had exchanged shots with the wild riders who circled them at top speed. The bullets of the Bedouins had skipped through their make-shift fortifications, knocking dust into their eyes and flicking bits of cloth from their garments, but by good chance neither of them had been hit.

Their one bit of luck, reflected Steve, as he cursed himself for a fool. What a mad venture it had been, anyway! To think that two men could so dare the desert and live, much less wrest from its abysmal bosom the secrets of the ages! And that crazy tale of a skeleton hand gripping a flaming gem in a dead city - bosh! What utter rot. He must have been crazy himself, the American decided, with the clarity of view that suffering and danger bring.

"Well, old horse," said Steve, lifting his rifle, "let's

get goin'. It's a toss-up if we die of thirst or get sniped off by the desert-brothers. Anyway, we're doin' no good here."

"God gives," agreed Yar Ali cheerfully. "The sun sinks westward. Soon the coolness of night will be upon us. Perhaps we will find water yet, sahib. Look, the terrain changes to the south."

Steve shaded his eyes against the dying sun. Beyond a level, barren expanse of several miles in width, the land did indeed tend to become more broken; aborted hills were in evidence. The American slung his rifle over his arm and sighed.

"Heave ahead, old horse; we're food for the buzzards anyhow."

The sun sank and the moon rose, flooding the desert with weird silver light. Drifted sand glimmered in long ripples, as if a sea had suddenly been frozen into immobility. Steve, parched fiercely by a thirst he dared not fully quench, cursed beneath his breath. The desert was beautiful beneath the moon, with the beauty of a cold marble lorelei to lure men to destruction. What a mad quest, his weary brain repeated; the Fire of Asshurbanipal retreated into the mazes of unreality with each step. The desert became not merely a material waste, but the greyness of the lost eons, in whose depths dreamed sunken things.

Steve stumbled and swore; was he failing already? Yar Ali swung along with the easy, tireless stride of the mountain man and Steve set his teeth, nerving himself to greater effort. They were entering the broken country at last and the going became harder. Shallow gullies and narrow ravines knifed the earth with wavering patterns. Most of them were nearly filled with sand and there was no trace of

water anywhere.

"This country was once oasis country," commented Yar Ali. "Allah knows how many centuries ago the sand took it, as the sand has taken so many cities in Turkestan."

They swung on, like dead men wandering in a grey land of death. The moon grew red and sinister as she sank, and shadowy darkness settled over the desert. Even the big Afghan's feet began to drag and Steve kept himself erect only by a savage effort of will. At last they came to a sort of ridge, on the southern side of which the land sloped downward.

"We rest," declared Steve. "There's no water in this hellish country. No use in goin' on forever. My legs are stiff as gun barrels. Here's a kind of stunted cliff, about as high as a man's shoulder, facing south. We'll sleep in the lee of it."

"And shall we not keep watch, Steeve sahib?"

"We don't," answered Steve. "If the Arabs can find us here, let 'em. If they cut our throats while we sleep, so much the better. We're goners anyhow."

With which optimistic observation Steve laid down stiffly in the deep sand. But Yar Ali stood, leaning forward, straining his eyes into the illusive darkness that turned the star-flecked horizons to murky wells of shadow.

"Something lies on the skyline to the south," he muttered uneasily. "A hill? I cannot tell, or even be sure that I see anything at all."

"You're seein' mirages already," said Steve irritably. "Lie down and sleep."

And, so saying, Steve slumbered.

The sun in his eyes awoke him. He sat up, yawning, and

his first sensation was that of thirst. He lifted his canteen and wet his lips. One drink left. Yar Ali still slept. Steve's eyes wandered over the southern horizon and he started. He kicked the recumbent Afghan.

"Hey, wake up, Ali; I reckon you weren't seein' things after all. There's your hill - and a queer lookin' one, too."

The Afridi awoke, as a wild thing wakes, swiftly and instantly, his hand leaping to his long knife as he glared about for enemies. His gaze followed Steve's pointing fingers and his eyes widened.

"By Allah and by Allah!" he swore. "We have come into a land of djinn! That is no hill - it is a city of stone in the midst of the sands!"

Steve bounded to his feet like a steel spring released, straining his eyes. As he gazed with bated breath, a fierce shout escaped his lips. At his feet the slope of the ridge ran down into a wide and level expanse of sand that stretched away southward. And far away, across those sands, to his straining sight the "hill" took shape, like a mirage growing from the drifting sands.

He saw great uneven walls, massive battlements - all about crawled the sands like a living, sensate thing, drifted high about the walls, softening the rugged outlines. No wonder at first glance the whole had appeared like a hill.

"Kara-Shehr!" Steve exclaimed fiercely. "Beled-el-Djinn! The city of the dead! It wasn't a pipe-dream after all! We've found it - by God, we've found it! Come on! Let's go!"

Yar Ali shook his head uncertainly and muttered something about evil djinn under his breath, but he followed. As for Steve, so fired was he by the sight that he forgot his thirst and hunger and the fatigue that a few hours' sleep had

not fully overcome. He trudged on swiftly, oblivious to the rising heat, his eyes gleaming with the lust of the explorer. It was not altogether greed for the fabled gem that had prompted Steve Clarney to risk his life in that grim wilderness; deep in his soul lurked the age-old heritage of the white man, the urge to seek out the hidden places of the world, and that urge had been stirred powerfully by the tale of the ancient lost city.

Now as they crossed the level waste that separated the broken land from the city, they saw the broken walls take clearer form and shape, as if they grew out of the morning sky. The city seemed built of huge blocks of black stone, but how high the walls had been there was no telling because of the sand that drifted about their base; in many places they had fallen away and the sand hid the fragments entirely.

The sun reached her zenith and thirst intruded itself in spite of zeal and enthusiasm, but Steve fiercely mastered his suffering. His lips were parched and swollen but he would not take that last drink until he reached the ruined city. Yar Ali wet his lips from his canteen and tried to share the remainder; Steve shook his head.

In the ferocious heat of the desert afternoon they reached the ruins, and passing through a wide breach in the crumbling wall, gazed on the dead city. Sand choked the ancient streets and lent fantastic form to huge, fallen and half hidden columns. So crumbled into decay and so covered with sand was the whole that the explorers could make out little of the original plan of the city - now it was but a waste of drifted sand and crumbling stone over which hung, like an invisible cloud, an aura of unspeakable antiquity.

But directly in front of them ran a broad avenue, the

outline of which not even the ravaging sands and winds of time had been able to efface. On either side of the way were ranged huge columns, not unusually tall but incredibly massive. On the top of each column stood a figure carved from solid stone - great, sombre images, half human, half bestial, partaking of the brooding brutishness of the whole city. Steve cried out in amazement.

"The winged bulls of Nineveh! The bulls with men's heads! By the saints, Ali, the old tales are true! The ancient Assyrians did build this city! The whole tale's true! They must have come here when the Babylonians destroyed Assyria - why, this scene's a dead ringer for pictures I've seen - reconstructed scenes of old Nineveh! And look!"

He pointed down the broad street to the great building which reared at the other end, a colossal, brooding edifice whose columns and walls of solid black stone blocks defied the winds and the sands of time. The drifting, obliterating sea washed about its foundations, overflowing into its doorways, but it would require a thousand years to inundate the whole structure.

"An abode of devils," muttered Yar Ali, uneasily.

"The temple of Baal!" exclaimed Steve. "Come on! I was afraid we'd find all the palaces and temples hidden by the sand and have to dig for the gem. But this was the highest point in the city."

They strode up the broad way, and Yar Ali, utterly fearless in the face of human foes, glanced nervously to right and left, half expecting to see a horned and fantastic face leering at him from behind a column. Steve himself felt the sombre antiquity of the place, and almost found himself fearing a rush of bronze war chariots down the forgotten

street, or to hear the sudden menacing flare of bronze trumpets. The silence in dead cities was so much more intense, he reflected, than that on the open desert.

They came to the portals of the great temple. Rows of immense columns flanked the wide doorway, which was ankle deep in sand, and from which sagged massive bronze frameworks that had once braced mighty doors, whose polished woodwork had centuries ago rotted away. They passed into a mighty hall of misty twilight, whose shadowy stone roof was upheld by columns like forest trees. The whole effect of the architecture was one of awesome magnitude, and sullen, breathtaking splendor, like a temple built by sombre giants for the abode of dark gods.

Yar Ali walked fearfully as if he expected to awake sleeping gods, and Steve, without the Afridi's superstitions, yet felt the gloomy majesty of the place lay sombre hands on his soul.

No trace of a footprint showed in the deep sand on the floor; half a century had passed since the affrighted and devil-ridden Turk had paced these silent halls. That there were Bedouins in the littoral Steve knew, but it was easy to see why those superstitious sons of the desert avoided this haunted city - and haunted it was, not by actual ghosts, perhaps, but by the shadows of lost splendors.

As they trod the sand of the hall which seemed endless, Steve pondered many questions: how did those fugitives from the wrath of frenzied rebels build this city? Why did they choose this spot? How did they pass through the country of their foes - for Babylonia lay between Assyria and the Arabian desert. Yet there had been no other place for them to go, reflected Steve; east lay Syria and the sea and north



and west swarmed "the dangerous Medes," those fierce Aryans whose aid had stiffened the arm of Babylon to smite her foe to the dust.

And whence came the stone that went into this city's building? Surely, as Yar Ali had said, once this was fertile country, watered by oases; and doubtless in the broken country they had passed over the night before, there had been quarries in the old days.

Then what had caused the city's downfall? Did the encroachment of the sands and the filling up of the springs cause the people to abandon it, or was it already a city of silence before the sands crept over the walls? Did the downfall come from within or without? Did civil war blot out the inhabitants, or were they overthrown by some powerful foe from the desert? Steve shook his head in baffled chagrin. The answers to those questions were hidden and lost in the mazes of forgotten ages.

"Allaho akbar!" They had traversed the great shadowy hall and at its further end they came upon a hideous black stone altar, behind which loomed an ancient god, bestial and horrific. Steve shrugged his shoulders as he recognized the monstrous aspect of the image - aye, that was Baal, on whose black altar in other ages many a screaming, writhing naked victim had offered up the quivering soul. The idol embodied in its utter, abysmal and sullen bestiality the whole soul of this demoniac city. Surely, thought Steve, the builders of Nineveh and Kara-Shehr were cast in another mold than the people of today. Their art and culture were too ponderous, too grimly barren of the lighter aspects of humanity, to be wholly human. Their architecture was of highest skill, yet of a massive, sullen and brutish nature

beyond the ken of modern man.

The adventurers went through a narrow door that opened in the end of the hall close to the idol, and came into a series of wide chambers, connected by column-flanked corridors. Along these they strode, and came at last to a wide stairway. Here Yar Ali halted.

"Wait a bit, sahib, we have dared much. Is it wise to dare more?"

Steve, a-quiver with eagerness, yet understood the Afghan's mind.

"You mean we shouldn't go up these stairs?"

"We have wandered into the castle of devils, Steeve sahib; any moment a djinn may bite our heads off."

"Well," said Steve, "we're dead men anyhow. But I tell you - you go on back through the hall and watch for Arabs while I go upstairs."

"Watch for a wind on the horizon," responded the Afghan gloomily, shifting his rifle and loosening his long knife in its scabbard. "No Bedouin comes here. Lead on, sahib. Thou'rt mad after the manner of all Franks, but I would not have thee face the djinn alone."

So the companions mounted the massive stairs, leaving their footprints in the dust that sifted deeply there. At the top they came into a wide circular chamber. This was lighted much better than the rest of the temple, by windows and by light that poured in from the high, pierced ceiling. But another light lent itself to the illumination. Both saw it at the same instant and both shouted in amazement.

A marble throne stood on a sort of stone dais, at the top of a short flight of broad steps, and on this throne glimmered something that caught the light of the sun and shed a

crimson glow all about. The Fire of Asshurbanipal!

Even after they had found the city, Steve had not really allowed himself to believe that they would find the stone. Yet there it was, shimmering among a heap of bones on the marble throne - a great ruby, as big as a pigeon's egg!

Steve sprang across the chamber and up the steps. Yar Ali was at his heels, yet when Steve would have taken up the ruby, the Afghan laid a hand on his arm.

"Let us not be hasty, Steeve sahib," said the big Muhammadan. "A curse lies on these ancient things. Else why has this rare gem lain here untouched in a country of thieves for so many centuries? It is not well to disturb the possessions of the dead."

"Bosh," this from Steve. "Superstitions. The Bedouins were scared by the tales that have come down to them from their ancestors. They mistrust cities anyway, and no doubt this one had an evil reputation in its lifetime. And nobody except Bedouins have ever seen this place before - except that Turk, who was probably half-demented with suffering.

"You can see for yourself that the 'skeleton hand' stuff was an embellishment - those bones are crumblin'. They may be the bones of a king - maybe not. Anyway, no tellin' how long they've been here. The dry desert air preserves such things indefinitely. May be Assyrian, or most likely Arab - some beggar that got the gem and then died on that throne, for some reason or other. Look, only the skull is anything like whole, and it'll turn to dust if I touch it."

He stretched forth his hand, but again Yar Ali halted him; the Afghan's eyes were uneasy. He seemed to be listening.

"I heard a sound, sahib," he muttered. "For the last few minutes I have heard stealthy noises as if ghosts or

dead men were stealing upon us. Harken! Is that not the sound of beings mounting the stairs?"

Steve wheeled, alert.

"By Judas, Ali," he snapped, "something is out there - "

The ancient walls re-echoed to a chorus of wild yells as a horde of savage figures flooded the chamber. For one dazed, insane instant Steve believed, wildly, that they were being attacked by re-embodied warriors of a vanished age, then the spiteful crack of a bullet past his ear and the acrid smell of powder told him that their foes were material enough. Clarney cursed; in their fancied security they had been caught like rats in a trap by the pursuing Arabs.

Even as the American threw up his rifle, Yar Ali fired point-blank from the hip, hurled his empty rifle into the horde and leaped down the steps yelling, his long Khyber knife shimmering in his hairy hand. Into his gusto for battle went real relief that his foes were human. A bullet ripped the turban from his head, but an Arab went down with a split skull beneath the hillsman's first, shearing stroke.

A tall Bedouin clapped his gun muzzle to the Afghan's side, but before he could pull the trigger, Clarney's bullet scattered his brains. The number of the attackers hindered them, and the tigerish quickness of the big Afridi made shooting as dangerous to themselves as to him. Some of them swarmed about him while others charged up the steps after Steve, who had expended his second bullet with deadly effect. At that range there was no missing.

Now in a flashing instant Clarney saw two things - a tall Arab, who with froth on his beard and a heavy scimitar uplifted, was almost upon him, and another who crouched on the floor drawing a careful bead on the plunging Yar Ali.

Steve made an instant choice and fired over the shoulder of the charging swordsman, killing the rifleman. Steve had voluntarily forfeited his own life to save his friend, for the scimitar was swinging at his own head, but at that instant the wielder slipped on the marble steps and the curved blade, swinging erratically from its arc, clashed on Steve's rifle barrel. In an instant the American clubbed his rifle and as the Arab recovered his balance and again raised the scimitar, Clarney struck with all his power, shattering stock and skull together.

And then a heavy ball smacked into his shoulder, sickening him with the shock and almost flooring him with the impact. As he staggered, a Bedouin whipped a noose about his feet and jerked heavily. Clarney pitched headlong down the steps to strike with stunning force. A gun-stock went up to dash out his brains, but an imperious command halted the blow.

"Slay him not, but bind him hand and foot."

As Steve struggled dazedly against many gripping hands, it seemed to him that the voice was faintly familiar.

The American's downfall had occurred in a matter of seconds. Even as Steve's second shot had cracked, Yar Ali had slashed a raider across the face and received a numbing blow from a rifle stock on his left arm. His sheepskin coat, worn in spite of the heat, saved his hide from half a dozen slashing knives. One was hacking at him with a scimitar, but Yar Ali engaged and locked blades, disarming his foe with a savage wrench. A rifle was discharged so close to his face that the powder burnt him, eliciting a blood-thirsty yell from the maddened Afghan. The rifleman paled and as Yar Ali swung up his blade, the Arab lifted his rifle above

his head in both hands to parry the downward blow, whereupon the Afridi, with a yelp of exultation, shifted as a jungle cat strikes and plunged his long knife into the Arab's belly. But at that instant a rifle stock, swung with all the hearty ill will its wielder could evoke, crashed against the giant's head, laying open his scalp and dashing him to his knees.

With the dogged and silent ferocity of his breed, Yar Ali staggered blindly up again, slashing at foes he could scarcely see, but a shower of blows dropped him again, nor did his attackers cease beating him until he lay still. They would have finished him in short order but for another peremptory order from their chief. They bound the unconscious knifeman and flung him alongside Steve, who was fully conscious, though the bullet in his shoulder hurt him savagely.

He glared up at the tall Arab who stood looking down at him.

"Well, sahib," said this one in perfect English, "do you not remember me?"

Steve scowled in the effort of concentration.

"You look familiar - by the devil! - you are - Nuredin el Mekru!"

"The sahib remembers," Nuredin salaamed mockingly. "And you remember, no doubt, the occasion on which you made me a present of - this?"

The dark eyes shadowed with bitter menace and the sheikh indicated a thin white scar on the angle of his jaw.

"I remember," snarled Clarney, whom pain and anger did not tend to make docile. "It was in Somaliland, years ago. You were in the slave trade then. A wretch of a negro escaped from you and took refuge with me. You walked into my camp one night in your high-handed way, started trouble

and got a butcher knife across your face. I wish I'd cut your lousy throat."

"You tried hard enough," answered the Arab. "But now the tables are turned."

"I thought your stampin' ground lay west," growled Clarney. "Yemen and the Somali country."

"I quit the slave trade long ago," returned the sheikh. "It is an outworn game. I led a band of raiders in Yemen for a time - then again I was forced to change my location. I came here with a few faithful followers. By Allah, these wild men nearly cut my throat at first! But I overcame their suspicions and now I lead more men than have followed me in years."

"Those you fought off yesterday were my men. They were scouts I had sent out ahead, and who rode back to report to me after you had beaten them off. My oasis lies far to the west. We have ridden many days, for I was on my way to this very city. When my scouts told me of two wanderers, I altered not my course, for I had business first in Beled-el-Djinn. We rode into the city from the west and saw your tracks in the sand. Tracking you was easy then."

Steve growled angrily.

"You wouldn't have caught us so easy, only we thought no Bedouin would dare to come into Kara-Shehr."

Nuredin nodded. "But I am no Bedouin. I have traveled far and seen many lands and many races. I have talked with many men and have read in the books of the Rhoumi, the Turks and the Franks as well as those of my own race. I know that fear is smoke, that the dead are dead, and that djinn and ghosts and curses are mists that the wind blows away. I had heard the tale of the Fire of Asshurbanipal; that



is why I came to this part of Arabia. But it has taken months to persuade my men to ride here with me. They fear the curse of the ancient ones who dwelt here.

"But - I am here! And your presence is an added pleasure. No doubt you have guessed why I had my men take you alive - I have a more elaborate entertainment planned for you and that Pathan swine. Now - I take the Fire of Asshur-banipal and we will go."

He turned toward the throne and one of his men, a bearded giant with but one eye, exclaimed: "Hold, my lord! Be-think ye - this city is very old, and old cities are foul. Ancient evil reigned here before the days of Muhammad. The djinn howl through these halls when the winds blow and men have seen ghosts dancing on the walls beneath the moon. No man of mortals has dared this black city for a thousand years - save one, half a century ago, who fled shrieking.

"In the old, old days men of the desert ventured here, and many died strangely, who sought to take the jewel, and on those who even looked upon it, a curse was laid. You have come here from Yemen; you do not understand that this city and that red stone are accursed. We have followed you here against our judgment because you have proved yourself a mighty man and have said you hold a charm against all evil beings. You said you but wished to look on this evil gem, but now we see it is your intention to take it for yourself.

"Beware, my lord! Courage and war-skill overcome not the powers of darkness, and that gleaming jewel is stronger than any charm. Do not offend the djinn!"

"Nay, Nuredin, do not dare the wrath of the djinn!" chor-

used the other Bedouins; the sheikh's own hard-bitten scoundrels said nothing. Hardened to crimes and impious deeds, they were less affected by the superstitions of the local Bedouins, to whom the curse on the dead city had been repeated, a dread tale, for centuries. Steve, even while hating Nuredin with unusually concentrated venom, realized the power of the man, the innate leadership that had enabled him to thus far overcome the fears and traditions of ages.

"The curse is laid on infidels who invade the city," answered Nuredin, "not on the Faithful; see, we have overcome our foes in this chamber. Now behold: unharmed I take the Fire of Asshurbanipal!"

And striding boldly up the marble steps he took up the great gem which gleamed and shimmered like a living flame in his hand. The Arabs held their breath; Yar Ali, conscious at last, groaned dismally, and Steve cursed sickly to himself. Worse than the threat of torture and death, worse than the throbbing of his wounded shoulder was the sight of his enemy seizing the treasure of which he had dreamed - for which he and Yar Ali had striven and bled.

God, what a barbaric scene - the thought came to him, even in his rage and savage disappointment - bound captives on the marble floor, wild warriors clustered about, gripping their weapons, the acrid scent of blood and burnt powder still lingering in the air, corpses strewn in a horrid welter of blood, brains and entrails - and on the dais, upon whose red-stained steps sprawled the body of the Arab that Steve had brained, beside the skull-adorned throne - the hawk-faced sheikh, oblivious to all except the evil crimson glow in his hand.

Nuredin was like one hypnotized, as all the slumbering

mysticism and mystery of his Semitic blood were stirred to the depths of his strange soul.

"The heart of all evil," murmured the sheikh, holding the magnificent stone up to the light where its gleams almost dazzled the eyes of the awed beholders. "How many princes died for thee in the dawns of the Beginnings of Happenings? What fair bosoms didst thou adorn, and what kings held thee as now I hold thee? Surely, blood went into thy making, the blood of kings surely throbs in thy shining and the heart-flow of queens in thy splendor. The brazen trumpets flared and the standards flamed in the sun; the deserts shook to the chanting of the chariots; sultans roared and revelled. Thou blazed above all. The worm gnawed the root, the sword cleft the bosom, the lizard crawled in the palaces of kings. Thy owners and they that wore thee, princesses and sultans and generals, they are dust and are forgotten, but thou blazest with majesty undimmed, fire of the world. Thou art Life itself, deathless and undying, as thou shalt be when I, thy master now, am as this moldering skull - "

Nuredin carelessly struck the skull which crumbled at his touch. And instantly he stiffened and reeled, while a hideous scream tore through his bearded lips - a shriek that was answered by a wild medley of yells as his warriors burst toward the door in wild flight. For a blind man could see that Death had set his seal suddenly on the brow of Nuredin el Mekru. Even his Yemen ruffians joined in the general stampede, and while their sheikh writhed and gibbered wordlessly, the band jammed in a battling, screeching mass in the doorway, tore through and raced madly down the wide stairs.

Steve and Yar Ali, watching wild-eyed, saw Nuredin

flail the air desperately with his left arm, about which a mottled bracelet seemed to have grown, then with mouth gaping in agony and eyes glaring, the Arab stumbled and pitched headlong from the steps to crash on the marble floor where he lay still.

The adventurers, flesh crawling, saw an evil-eyed adder untwine itself from about the dead man's wrist and crawl away. The sheikh lay motionless, still gripping the Fire of Asshurbanipal which cast a sinister radiance over his corpse.

"God is God and Muhammad his Prophet!" breathed Yar Ali fearsomely. "The dogs have fled and they will not return."

Steve, listening closely, heard no sound. Truly, it had seemed to those wild nomads that the ancient curse had fallen on the profaner.

"Lie still, Steeve sahib," said the Afridi, "a little shifting of my body and I can reach thy cords with my teeth."

An instant later Steve felt Yar Ali's powerful teeth at work on his bonds and in a comparatively short time his hands were free. Rising to a sitting position then, he freed his ankles, working awkwardly because his left arm was practically useless. Then he freed Yar Ali, and the big Afghan rose stiffly and stretched.

"By the fangs of the devils," he swore, "may evil descend on them. Thy shoulder, sahib, let me see to it - by Allah, those dogs dealt sorely with us; I can scarcely move, such a beating they gave me."

"Wait," Steve stepped suddenly to a window.

"Just like I thought," he grunted. "I can see into the city from this window. The Arabs have ridden clean out of sight,

I reckon. But look, they went in such a confounded hurry they didn't stop for the horses of the men we killed! There they stand, tied in the shade of that ruined wall. And I can see canteens and food pouches fastened on the saddles!"

"God is great!" exclaimed Yar Ali, preparing to bandage Steve as best he could.

"A fightin' chance!" Steve felt like whooping and doing a horn pipe in his dizzy flood of exultation. "Horses, water and food - we've got a chance to reach the coast! You're beat to a pulp and I've got a slug in my shoulder, but nothin' can stop us now!"

He stepped toward the fallen sheikh.

"Wait, sahib!" Yar Ali interposed. "Are you mad, that you would touch one on whom the curse has fallen?"

"Bosh; a snake bit the sheikh. As for that old curse - likely the people of Kara-Shehr died of a plague. The taint remained in the houses for years and the Arabs who came here died too."

Steve stooped and stolidly wrenched the great gem from the dead hand.

"An adder'd crawled inside the skull - the sheikh clapped his hand down on it, the skull crumbled to dust and the snake just naturally sank his fangs into the nearest object.

"A beauty, eh, Ali?" Steve held up the gem admiringly, gloating over its luster and sheen. "We're rich men. I'm no judge of jewels, but I bet this gem will bring a fabulous price anywhere. A curse - bosh! But you know, Ali," he ruminated, "I'll admit - it is kind of strange that an adder should happen to be sleepin' in that skull just at that particular time."

# Tower Bard Hero

BY WALTER SHEDLOFSKY

Tormented by what grief unassuaged can bring, no can  
Or cannot averted morbid mind which bred death.  
We, your acolytes, debase not your sad vain curse;  
Exciting words you etched live beyond your dead breath,  
Robust sagas and virile runes of arcane verse.

Betrayed by covert time, we souls who never rate  
Admire Kull and Kane, and, as a lauding claque, boast  
Riotously of Lord who tamed Queen of Black Coast,  
Dauntless hero of worlds time cannot renovate.

Horror still glows weirdly in rhymes odd thoughts deign  
    skull,  
Epics gory still charm without a plot skein dull.  
Rapt in strange glories, seventeen still venerate  
Old friends of sword and fantasy: Bran, King Conan.

Letter: Robert E. Howard to  
Harold Preece,  
no date

Thanks for the Saint Padraic's card. Were I to name another trio to equal the one there portrayed, I should hesitate. But I believe I would name Hugh O'Neill, Daniel O'Connell and the great Patrick Sarsfield. Strange the number of great men western Europe has produced compared to eastern Europe.

I don't know if I thanked you for the picture in my last letter. If I didn't, you can take it that I do now. It's a good likeness of you. Glad you're selling articles to E.H.J. I've tried my hand at it myself, but that just isn't in my line. I'm no debunker. I have to work too hard. If I had plenty of money, it might be different, but if I had plenty of dough, I'd probably be too busy spending it to have any debunking time. Judas, what I could do with a million! Prize fights, horse races, yacht races, chorus girls, explorations, rare books. But hell, what's the use. If I ever get rich I'll be too old to enjoy it. By the way, are you following my swash-buckling sailor in Fight Story Magazine? He appears semi-regularly there.

Saint Padraic's Day usually leaves me with a distaste for the whole Celtic Irish race. Simply because my last name isn't Celtic, the shamrock I wear is sometimes the object of questioning glances. Well, anyhow I notice damn



well that none of my bold tribesmen have tried to uphold Celtic integrity by jerking it off. I'll wear the green if I have to fight every damned Celt in the world. How many of those who wear purely Gaelic surnames don't have the blood of Danes, Welsh, English or Dutch in them? Blasted few. You'll find a locality or town for every one of my names, in Ireland. There's a Robertstown in Kildare, an Irvinestown in Fermanagh, a Patrick - hell, anywhere you look - and a Mt. Howard in Wexford. I'll admit my blood is more or less mixed up - but how many people in Europe and America are not of mixed bloods? If nobody but a pure Celt wore the green, it wouldn't be worn except perhaps by a few savages living in the Connaught hills. A man has too many grandparents to be pure blooded anything. One of my great-grandfathers was born somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean between the coast of Kerry and New York - I mean, my great-great-grandfather - he was of the old Gaelic family of the Mac-Enry. He married Anne O'Tyrrell, who was born in Connaught. Another of my great-great-grandfathers was born in Georgia of Anglo-Irish parents. Another was born in Virginia of Scotch-Irish parents. Another was born in Denmark and he married an Irish-American woman in Mississippi. But enough of that; I didn't start out to give my family tree - only to illustrate the unlikelihood of our ancestors to perform according to the mandates of pure racial lineage. Looking back over three hundred years I can find only one member of the family who did not trace his line back to Ireland, whether his name was English, Irish or Scotch - the red bearded Danish giant who was one of my great-great-grandfathers.

Considering one's innumerable uncles, aunts and cousins

it's easy to understand the old saying about the whole world being akin. What a conglomeration of mixed breeds this country is.



## *Visions*

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

I cannot believe in a paradise  
Glorious, undefiled,  
For gates all scrolled and streets of gold  
Are tales for a dreaming child.

I am too lost for shame  
That it moves me unto mirth,  
But I can vision a Hell of flame  
For I have lived on earth.

## *Dust*

BY BRYCE D. THOMPSON

I stand alone amidst the black  
That casts a shroud upon the land.  
Dim shadows form and at my side  
They whisper, "God shall die with man!"

The unseen winds of the Universe  
Sweep down from out the Stygian sky.  
All I see is turned to dust  
And all that lives is soon to die.

As I view, through eyes that disbelieve,  
The fading light of the final day,  
A wind stained black by the sins of man  
Doth blow the dust of God away.

# Conan's Parents

BY FRED BLOSSER

Very little mention is made in the Nemedian Chronicles of the very early life of its greatest hero, Conan the Cimmerian. We do know that Conan, at fifteen, participated in the sack of Venarium and that his name was already known at that time around the council fires of his tribe. We know that he was born on a battlefield. We know that his father was a blacksmith and his grandfather was a member of a southern Cimmerian tribe who settled among a northern clan after a blood feud drove him forth from his own people - rather like Turlogh Dubh O'Brien several millenia later.

But what of Conan's mother? What of his upbringing and the circumstances that led to his decision, at sixteen, to leave Cimmeria and seek his fortune in the southlands?

And what of the eventual fate of his parents?

From information supplied us by the saga and its extensive footnote "The Hyborian Age," we can assume that life among a clan in the bleak hills of Cimmeria was necessarily rugged and demanding. Man against man and man against nature, tooth-and-claw. Conan, reminiscing on his homeland in Chapter Two of "The Phoenix on the Sword," remembers it as a gloomy land - "all of hills, darkly wooded, under skies nearly always gray, with winds moaning drearily down the valleys" - and the gods of his people "a dark

race" offering "no hope here or hereafter." The people are a dour lot; the Aquilonian Prospero comments in the same passage that he never saw a Cimmerian drink anything but water, or sing any songs but dirges. Prospero is probably exaggerating - certainly the Cimmerians had their equivalent of peat whiskey and probably relished a shot now and then - but we can assume that on the whole Conan's people were a sort of modified Hyborian Calvinistic society, their spirit molded by the harsh, colorless land they inhabited.

Physical conflict would occupy much of the time of such a people. Conan's brawny build is patently an inheritance from his smithy-father, but certainly hunting, cliff scaling, and wrestling did much to hone the youth's temper and reflexes. Recalling that Turlogh O'Brien was tossed into a snow bank at birth to test his fitness to live ("The Dark Man"), it is likely that Cimmerian babes - Conan included - underwent similar ordeals.

In light of all this, it is easy to see whence Conan derived his fortitude, his moodiness, his adversity to doctrines of fatalism, Crom and his dark race notwithstanding. Also, early training in hand-to-hand combat accounts for the Adventurer's dexterity with sword and ax, and youthful hunting expeditions for the amazing stalking abilities displayed in "Beyond the Black River."

For other traits more difficult to explain - Conan's wanderlust, streaks of gentleness, and frequent good humor - we might lay the credit to another important early influence: his mother.

Conan's mother was probably not a Cimmerian but an outlands woman. Prospero's comment that Conan more resembles a Vanir or Aesir than a Cimmerian in his relish

for song, laughter, and strong drink suggests that Conan's mother was a woman of one of these people, perhaps abducted by his father on a raid over the border during a period of warfare. Conan's blue eyes - an Aesir-Vanir trait - lends strength to this theory, as does the fact that the Adventurer first went north rather than south when he left Cimmeria at sixteen. He fought with the Aesir against the more belligerent Vanir at this time - as he did later in the adventure chronicled as "The Frost Giant's Daughter" - so his mother was likely an Aesir. A gentle wench, probably, given to the enjoyment of the music and poetry of the skalds of her folk, imparting to her son a sense of mercy and self-control to temper his martial training.

Certainly, evidence of such humanitarian teachings crops up now and then in the saga. Conan's un-barbaric pity for the maimed, tormented alien being in "Tower of the Elephant." His protective instinct toward the helpless girls he often encounters in his wanderings. His just rule as king of Aquilonia in later years. His appreciation of the poetry of the bard Rinaldo in "Phoenix on the Sword," and so on.

Conan's wanderlust may also be attributable to his mother. Perhaps it was she who first inspired within him the wish to view first-hand the wonders of the civilized nations of the south.

And here an inkling of what drove the teen-aged Conan to break ties with his tribe and strike out on his own - dissatisfaction with the dour predestination dogma of the Cimmerians, the Aesir-Viking spirit of adventure and waywardness chafing under the hand-to-mouth existence of the hill clans, the vision of broad green plains and wide blue rivers and cities of gold stretching beyond the wall of gray hills

and fog-shrouded valleys of Cimmeria.

Both Conan's parents were probably dead when the youth finally decided to pull up stakes and move on. A lack of family ties would have facilitated such a decision. Likely, both father and mother - and brothers and sisters, if any - had been killed in bloody tribal wars prior to this. Certainly, there is no further mention of kin in the saga, despite two or three brief visits paid by Conan to his homeland in future years.

In summation, we may infer that Conan is half-Cimmerian and half-Aesir, and that he owes as much to his gentle-spirited, poetry-loving mother as to his blunt, burly, solid father. No nameless orphan like Kull, but a true son of Crom and Ymir.





# Marching Song of Connacht

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

The men of the East are decked in steel,  
They march with a trumpet's din,  
They glitter with silks and golden scales,  
And high kings boast their kin -  
We of the West wear the hides of wolves,  
But our hearts are steel within.

They of the East ride gallant steeds,  
Their spears are long and brown;  
Their shields are set with sparkling stones,  
And each knight wears a crown -  
We fight on foot as our forebears fought,  
And we drag the rider down.

We race the steed of the Saxon knight  
Across the naked fen -  
They of the East are full of pride,  
Cubs of the Lion's den.  
They boast they breed a race of kings -  
But we of the West breed Men.

All fled — all done, so lift me on the pyre;  
The Feast is over and the lamps expire.



# AMAZING STORIES

APRIL  
25 Cents



**A  
COSMIC  
JUKEBOX  
SCAN**

